

DECEPTIVE LEGENDS: THE USE OF MIRACLES IN EARLY NEW TESTAMENT
APOCRYPHA

BY
JACOB D. ZABELL

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PROF. ROBERT E. WENDLAND, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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ABSTRACT

Early texts of the New Testament apocrypha contain some of the most fascinating and entertaining stories in the realm of Christian literature. From the beginning of the New Testament Church, stories began to circulate about Jesus' childhood years, the apostles' missionary adventures, and other biblical characters that early Christians were eager to hear more about. Scholarly research views the New Testament apocrypha as an essential part of Christianity today. However, all that glitters is not gold. Though entertaining and fascinating on the surface, the contents of the New Testament apocrypha are deceptive and problematic. Christians ought to draw a careful line between Scripture and apocrypha. Though the miraculous events in the New Testament apocrypha seem similar to what we see in the canonical New Testament, they could not be more different. The miracles in Scripture serve to communicate Christ and to point to his work as our Savior. In contrast, the miracles in the New Testament apocrypha paint deceptive legends that the very first Christians were forced to contend with.

INTRODUCTION

The scriptural teaching of the sufficiency of God's Word is a great comfort for faithful Christians. The Bible is God's very Word—inspired and inerrant—and it is completely sufficient for salvation. Yet, as comforting and important as that truth is, it can create a unique temptation. The confessional Lutheran may believe in the sufficiency of the Word and then proceed to take that truth as permission to read nothing else in the realm of Christian literature. Thus, when the term, "New Testament apocrypha" is thrown out, it may be somewhat familiar to the confessional Lutheran. But ultimately, he knows nothing about it other than that it should be avoided on account of it being "noncanonical."

Historical critical scholars do not have the same temptation. In fact, where the confessional Lutheran is quick to draw distinctions between the Bible and the apocrypha, scholars tend to do the opposite. Since the Bible and New Testament apocrypha in general fall under the same category of Christian literature, scholars demand them to be compared. For many scholars, the New Testament apocrypha is an essential component in painting a full and true picture of Christianity. But for the confessional Lutheran, the sufficiency of the Word still stands. As such, God's Word cannot be so simply likened to uninspired literature.

In this way, confessional Lutherans might take issue with a matter that critical scholars may fail to fully realize—and that has to do with miracles. There are a host of miracles that occur in the apocryphal New Testament. For the unbelieving scholar, these miracles are entertaining and preposterous. Believers can agree. Yet an issue arises when nothing stops the unbelieving

scholar from saying that the miracles in the *canonical* New Testament are similarly entertaining and preposterous. Thus, when looking at the miracles in the New Testament apocrypha, scholars find many parallels with New Testament Scripture. In other words, miracles are what the two literary groups have in common. Jesus raised people from the dead in the canonical New Testament, and he does the same thing (frequently) in the apocryphal New Testament. Jesus miraculously calmed furious storms while at sea, and Andrew did the same thing as was recorded in *The Acts of Andrew*.¹ God became man by being born of the Virgin Mary, a miracle that is further supported by *The Protoevangelium of James*.

On the surface, the presence of miracles performed by Jesus and his apostles simply indicates that the reader is dealing with a Christian text. It is true that those without faith would be hard-pressed to believe in such miracles in the first place. The bigger issue, however, is the assumption that the miracles performed in both canon and apocrypha are to be treated the same. Scholars are so concerned with history that they neglect hermeneutics.² They fail to ask the important question, “Why?” Why did Jesus and his apostles perform miracles at all in the canonical New Testament? And how does that compare with the miracles performed in the apocryphal New Testament? If Paul was able to raise Eutychus from the dead in Acts 20:9–12, then is there a problem with literature in which each of the apostles raise hordes of people from death left to right? What underlying message were these apocryphal miracles communicating to Christian readers of the past?

1. *The Acts of Andrew* 8, J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M.R. James*, (New York: Oxford, 2009), 274.

2. This is not to say that confessional Lutherans do not care about history or that every scholar who specializes in the apocrypha fails to address certain hermeneutical issues. The author of this thesis simply found in his research that many authors who do specialize in New Testament apocrypha are more concerned with a rationalistic, historical critical method of interpretation than they are with a confessional Lutheran, “let Scripture interpret Scripture,” method.

To answer these questions, the confessional Lutheran needs to engage with the written apocryphal texts themselves. In reading selections of New Testament apocrypha, this author has found that the use of miracles in the texts can serve as an interpretive lens. Therefore, this thesis seeks to ask how the miracles in the apocryphal New Testament compare to the miracles in the biblical New Testament. To answer this question, this thesis will explore the use of miracles in certain apocryphal texts, such as *The Protoevangelium of James*, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, and the major apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, which include, *The Acts of Andrew*, *The Acts of John*, *The Acts of Paul*, *The Acts of Peter*, and *The Acts of Thomas*. These texts were chosen because of their antiquity and because they aptly include many miracles surrounding Jesus and his apostles.

This thesis will argue that the miracles found in the apocryphal New Testament both diminish and contradict the miracles found in the biblical New Testament. First, they diminish Christ's glory by elevating human individuals in his place. Second, they fail to communicate Christ's gracious and proper work of forgiving sins and declaring righteousness. And third, they detract from the power and sufficiency of the Word of God by becoming a means for conversion.

Before examining the texts themselves, it is important to understand their context. Thus, this thesis will provide details concerning the New Testament apocrypha in general. It will cover the history of the New Testament apocrypha, its value, and its definition according to scholarship today. From there, this thesis will analyze each apocryphal text mentioned above. It will provide brief background information for the texts before moving on to their portrayal of miracles and how they line up with Scripture's usage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One motive for writing this thesis was due to a lack of confessional Lutheran commentary on the New Testament apocrypha. Back in 2012, Concordia published *The Apocrypha: The Lutheran Edition with Notes*. As good of a resource as that is, it primarily covers the Old Testament apocrypha. The average lay member of a WELS church would be hard-pressed to find a “confessional Lutheran take” on specific sources that are New Testament apocrypha. Of course, good advice for any lay member or pastor who is curious about the New Testament apocrypha would be to read it themselves.

Thankfully, there is no shortage of books that are collections of New Testament apocryphal texts. Perhaps the oldest, most well-known, and most influential would be M.R. James’ *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses* (1924). Since its initial publication, James’ work has been reprinted and revised throughout the years. Of note is the revision done by J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M.R. James* (2005). Elliott’s revision provides modernized English translations and new formal introductions to each text.³ Additionally, Elliott notes how much has happened in the study of New Testament apocrypha since 1924—namely, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in

3. Elliott, *Collection*, x.

1945.⁴ Therefore, Elliott's revision of James' work was the primary source used for this thesis in regard to the apocryphal texts themselves.

A book for anyone interested in early New Testament apocrypha would be the aptly named *Early New Testament Apocrypha* Vol. 9 (2022), edited by J. Christopher Edwards. For the most part, each chapter provides an essay that deals with one apocryphal text that falls within the timeframe of the first four centuries A.D. Each of the apocryphal texts that this thesis will address gets special attention in this book. While the book is comprised of various authors, each chapter follows a similar format. The essayists include information regarding the authorship, dating, languages, and provenances of the apocrypha while also briefly summarizing their contents. They cover interpretive issues and prominent themes in each text as well. Each chapter includes a section titled "Key Passages for New Testament Studies and their Significance." These sections proved to be helpful as they list significant allusions and quotations of the apocryphal texts to the canonical New Testament. These essays, combined with James' and Elliott's own introductory remarks, provide much-needed context for scholars and everyday readers alike.

A prominent author in this field of research is Bart D. Ehrman. The author of this thesis remembers using his book, *After the New Testament, 100–300 C.E.: A Reader in Early Christianity* (2015), as a textbook for a college class studying Patristics. In it, Ehrman uses primary sources from these beginning centuries to narrate the events of the early Christian Church. He highlights the initial spread of Christianity, the challenges it faced due to persecution and heresy, its defense and diversity, and ends with the prevail of orthodoxy. Ehrman has two other noteworthy books: *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament*

4. Elliott, *Collection*, ix.

(2003) and *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (2003). These books serve as companions to each other. Combined, they offer a more thorough treatment of what Ehrman covers in *After the New Testament*. *Lost Christianities* specifically offered a useful chapter on Gnosticism that will be briefly elaborated on later. Overall, Ehrman provides a great introduction into the history of New Testament Christianity for readers looking to dig into such things.

Stephen J. Shoemaker's *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (2016) is a key resource for the study and history of Mariology. It elaborates on Marian traditions and points to the protoevangelium as a pivotal source for Mariology. Other notable New Testament apocrypha specialists include François Bovon, Tony Burke, and Brent Landau. For WELS readers who want a WELS pastor's take on New Testament apocrypha, Pastor Nathan Cordes' essay, "The Gnostic Gospels: A River of Lies" is recommended.

NEW TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA

The History of New Testament Apocrypha

In the early life of the New Testament Christian church, certain writings began to circulate that we refer to today as “apocrypha,” a word literally meaning something “hidden” or “secret.” Many of these writings claimed apostolic authorship with titles like *The Acts of Paul* or *The Gospel of Thomas*. This was done to catch people’s attention. By associating their works with some of Jesus’ closest followers, these authors could capitalize on the growing popularity of Christianity. While some of these authors simply wrote for entertainment purposes or monetary gain, others probably did so to receive a hearing for their personal views.⁵ In fact, many of these texts likely came from self-proclaimed Christians who sought to authorize important religious doctrines or practices while refuting their enemies.⁶

These writings came suddenly and at a time before the full canon of Scripture was received.⁷ Thus, Christians who lived in the New Testament Church’s infancy had to grapple

5. Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament, 100-300 C.E.: A Reader in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 267.

6. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 267.

7. The “full canon of Scripture” refers to the list of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments found in Bibles across the world today. Note that the Church *received* the canon, it did not *recognize* or *create* the canon. Confessional Lutherans are careful to say that God himself determines what his holy Word consists of and that he offered it to his Church as a gift. It should also be noted that, while the early New Testament Christians questioned the canonicity of certain books of the Bible, there were other books that were universally accepted, later referred to as *homologoumena*. For example, a corpus of Paul’s letters was formed and accepted prior to 100 A.D.

with a wide array of seemingly scriptural texts in circulation. The Lutheran confessors reflected this reality in The Epitome of the Formula of Concord:

Immediately after the time of the apostles—in fact, while they were still alive—false teachers and heretics invaded the church. Against them the early church prepared *symbola*, that is, short, explicit confessions, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal, Christian creed and confession of the orthodox and true church of Christ, namely, the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. We pledge ourselves to these and thereby reject all heresies and teachings that have been introduced into the church of God contrary to them.⁸

Today, Christians can indeed point to the confessions of the “unanimous, universal” Christian creeds as a defense against heresy. However, there is a large gap in time between the time of the apostles and the formation of the first official Christian creed in the fourth century. And in that gap, not only was Christianity continuously attacked by false teachings, but it was also considered illegal by the Roman government under which it began. In such a turbulent time, it became crucial for post-apostolic Christians to stick to the apostles’ teachings.

And many did. Faithful Christians defended the true teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Church fathers like Irenaeus of Lyons wrote against apocryphal writings that were to be condemned as heretical and noncanonical. True apostolicity and canonicity prevailed. As a result, modern confessional Christians are more blessed than their post-apostolic brothers and sisters. We live in a time with the three official Christian creeds mentioned by the Lutheran

Stephen P. Valleskey, “The New Testament Canon: Cur Alii Prae Aliis?” (essay presented at the South Central District Pastoral Conference, April 23-24, 1990, 3, <http://essays.wls.edu:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/1378>; Wilbert R. Gawrisch, “How the Canonicity of the Bible was Established,” (essay presented at the Ohio Conference of the Michigan District, January 22, 1973), 12–13, <http://hdl.handle.net/123456789/1752>.

8. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 486.

confessors. We have the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments in their entirety. And Christianity is a global religion with hundreds of millions of followers today.

The Value of New Testament Apocrypha

What use is there, then, for those apocryphal texts of the New Testament today? Should they be quickly dismissed by modern Christians without a second thought? Martin Luther included the Old Testament apocrypha in his German translation of the Bible, noting that they were on a different level than Scripture, but still “useful and good to read.”⁹ This was due to the Old Testament apocrypha including practical wisdom and what could be considered accurate Jewish tradition that helped inform the culture backing the canonical Old Testament. But does Luther’s comment apply to the New Testament apocrypha as well? Are they also “useful and good to read?”

Historical critical scholars certainly think so. They see these apocryphal texts as contributions to the evolving wave of Christianity. For the scholar, it is necessary to comb through the apocrypha to uncover the fullest picture of Christianity possible.¹⁰ Modern Christians can agree to an extent. The New Testament apocrypha gives important insight into what some of the very first Christians were exposed to and believed. Whether or not a Christian buys into the historical details or theological truths presented in the texts, that does not change their effects on traditions and beliefs present in Christianity today. For example, *The Acts of*

9. Gawrisch, “Canonicity of the Bible,” 6.

10. Tony Burke and Brent Landau, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, vol. 1. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), xiii.

Thomas upholds the tradition of the apostle Thomas being the first missionary to bring Christianity to India.¹¹ *The Protoevangelium of James* has impacted Christian traditions and beliefs concerning Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the point of some insisting it at least be referred to as “quasi-canonical.”¹²

That said, there is no question that the New Testament apocrypha contains both scriptural and historical inconsistencies. Even historical critical scholars who do not subscribe to the inspiration or inerrancy of Scripture believe as much. *The Protoevangelium of James* gets cultural and historical details wrong.¹³ The same goes for *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.¹⁴ The apocryphal Acts of the Apostles contain gnostic themes of dualism, asceticism, and encratism to the extreme. In these things, confessional Lutherans and critical scholars agree.

And yet, Luther’s assertion about the Old Testament apocrypha rings true. The New Testament apocrypha is simply not on the same level as Holy Scripture and is rightly excluded from the canon of Scripture. Indeed, they can be beneficial to read. But they should not be considered a part of true Christianity as they present problematic theological implications that early Christians had to contend with.

11. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament*, (Oxford University Press, 2003), 122.

12. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 48–49.

13. Inconsistencies such labeling Simeon as a high priest, identifying Zacharias with the Zacharias of Matt 23:25, the timing of the Magi’s visitation, and more. Elliott, *Collection*, 61.

14. Nathan Cordes notes that if Jesus performed all the miracles listed in the infancy gospel, then it makes no sense that it took until Jesus was 31 before he became popular. It also contradicts John 2:11 which says Jesus’ first miracle was changing water into wine. “The Gnostic Gospels: A River of Lies,” (essay presented at the Chicago Pastor’s Conference (WELS), January 15, 2007), 8, <http://essays.wls.edu:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/1090>.

Defining Terms

There are two terms that appear frequently in research surrounding New Testament apocrypha that merit brief explanation. One of them is the term “New Testament apocrypha” itself. The word “apocrypha” comes from the Greek word, *ἀπόκρυφος*, which refers to something hidden or something secret. The implication is that for a source to be apocryphal, it must contain some kind of hidden or secret information. Furthermore, the phrase “New Testament” indicates that the writings need to be somehow associated with the canonical New Testament.

Many apocryphal texts fit this label as they attempt to fill in gaps left by Scripture. For example, the New Testament Gospels do not extensively cover the details of Jesus’ upbringing. As a result, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* was written to fill in the previously “hidden” details of Jesus’ life story. This same treatment occurs for many characters found in the New Testament: The Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, the Twelve Apostles, and even Pontius Pilate. These gaps are not limited to narrative aspects either. Some apocryphal texts like *The Gospel of Thomas* contain additional sayings or teachings of Jesus that the Gospel writers seemingly failed to include.

The fact stands, however, that the Gospels were never intended to be exhaustive accounts of Jesus’ life. John records at the end of his Gospel: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (Jn 21:25 NIV). Instead of including every detail, the Gospel writers were primarily concerned with Jesus’ ministry, passion, and resurrection. That said, one must wonder if the verse at the end of John’s Gospel served as an impetus for many apocryphal texts surrounding the life of Jesus. For, in essence, whenever New Testament Scripture is silent, apocryphal writings readily emerge to fill in the details.

While the label “New Testament apocrypha” can be understood properly, certain scholars fear that the term fails to adequately describe many of the sources that are included under its umbrella. This is partly due to the growing scope of New Testament apocryphal texts. Unlike the Old Testament apocrypha, which is an identifiable and set list of books, the New Testament apocrypha “represent an amorphous and wide-ranging group.”¹⁵ Scholars are still discovering and translating texts from antiquity, and many of them are still considered to be viably included in the New Testament apocrypha.

In the preface to his collection on early New Testament apocrypha, Elliott admits that many texts included in the collection were inspired by New Testament narratives. However, he also argues that many “have no obvious link with the genres of literature to be found in the canonical New Testament.”¹⁶ A reader will find these apocryphal texts under categories called “Gospels,” “Apocalypses,” “Epistles,” and “Acts,” yet the texts themselves may not be structurally or stylistically similar to their canonical counterparts. For example, “few of the apocryphal gospels are correctly classified as gospels in the normal understanding of this term. In style, theology, and content, they are hardly comparable to the canonical Gospels.”¹⁷

Ehrman notes how even the word “apocrypha” can limp as a designation. “The term *apocrypha* literally means 'secret,' and may be taken to refer to the secretive nature of the information conveyed in some of these works. But most of them are not at all esoteric, and so the term is not altogether apt.”¹⁸ In saying this, Ehrman recognizes that many of these texts do not

15. Elliott, *Collection*, xi.

16. Elliott, *Collection*, xi.

17. Elliott, *Collection*, xi–xii.

18. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 267.

primarily contain messages that were intended to be secretive, hidden, or exclusive. Yet scholars stick with the designation “New Testament apocrypha” as most readers “know the sorts of writings that may be found with this name on its spine.”¹⁹

For the sake of this thesis, New Testament apocrypha will be defined as non-biblical Christian literature that fill in gaps or add details for characters, events, or teachings found in the New Testament. As previously mentioned, this thesis will look primarily at early sources of New Testament apocrypha from the first four centuries A.D. Even if some scholars argue about whether “New Testament apocrypha” is a valid title for the large group of writings included under it, the texts covered in this thesis seem to fit nicely under such categorization.

The second term that merits explanation is “Gnosticism.” The word derives from the Greek word *γνῶσις*, which means “knowledge.” Texts in the apocryphal New Testament are often labeled as gnostic texts connected to the gnostic movement in one way or another. Gnosticism has been notoriously difficult to define, since the term has come to represent a diverse array of beliefs and practices. Nathan Cordes put it well when he concluded: “The more one reads about Gnosticism, the harder one is pressed to define it.”²⁰

That said, there are aspects of Gnosticism that are generally accepted. The Gnostics were groups primarily made up of Christians that thrived during the second century A.D., right around when the first New Testament apocrypha began to circulate. They were exclusive clubs that emphasized a secret kind of knowledge (*γνῶσις*) necessary for true salvation. A defining characteristic of early Gnosticism was its radical dualism. They rejected the material world as evil along with the bodies of human beings in favor of the spiritual and the divine.

19. Burke and Landau, *More Noncanonical Scriptures*, xi.

20. Cordes, “River of Lies,” 1.

According to early Gnostic tradition, the one true God, who is entirely spirit, did not create the world that we live in. Rather, the world is the creation of an imperfect entity called the Demiurge, and it serves as a place of imprisonment for mankind. However, within some humans lies a spark of the divine that needs to be liberated to return to its true home. The only way to liberate a person's divine spark is through secret knowledge that needs to be revealed from something outside the evil material world. This is where Jesus fits into gnostic tradition: he is the one who provides the secret knowledge necessary to free the divine spark within people. "It is this revelation of truth, rather than his [Christ's] death and resurrection that ultimately matters for salvation."²¹ Thus, the goal of Gnosticism revolves around freeing the soul from a person's evil body.

Suffice it so say, Gnosticism presents significant alterations from Scripture. Namely, if the human body is entirely evil, then Jesus must not have been truly human. If Jesus was not a human being, then he could not have suffered and died in humanity's place. Not to mention that many Bible passages speak of Christ's coming on Judgment Day to raise believers from the dead in both body and soul (Isa 26:19; Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:51–54; Phil 3:20–21). These dualistic views led Gnosticism to promote asceticism as well. "Their logic was that since the body is evil, it should be punished.... the body should be denied all pleasure."²² In several ways, Gnosticism stands diametrically opposed to God's Word.

The question, then, is how to distinguish whether a given text is gnostic or not. Broadly speaking, considering how "Gnosticism" is itself a broad term, any text that contains gnostic

21. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 163.

22. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 126.

themes could fit under its umbrella. Much of the New Testament apocrypha is labeled “gnostic” simply because they contain themes of dualism and asceticism. Both the terms “apocrypha” and “Gnosticism” themselves point to some kind of secret or hidden knowledge and thus go hand in hand. However, in a narrower sense, there are certain apocryphal texts that explicitly teach gnostic traditions and beliefs. Therefore, *The Secret Book of John* can be considered “more gnostic” than *The Protoevangelium of James* since the former contains specific gnostic traditions that were taught among specific gnostic groups; while the latter merely contains gnostic themes and can be broadly categorized as secret knowledge.

So, in a broad sense, almost every piece of New Testament apocrypha can be classified as a gnostic text as they either fill in the gaps of New Testament Scripture or contain themes and aspects of Gnosticism. But, in a narrow sense, only certain apocryphal texts have been proven to be used by known second century gnostic sects that contain explicit gnostic teachings and traditions.

Cordes provides a helpful definition of Gnosticism in the broad sense: “Like a river, Gnosticism never holds its shape long enough to make a specific definition stick for all time. I am left with defining Gnosticism as a clever pack of lies dressed up for different cultures as 'superior knowledge' without which you cannot have spiritual victory.”²³ The “lies” presented in early apocryphal writings, whether the author intended to violently sabotage God’s Word or not, had detrimental implications for the people reading them. As we move on to look at the inclusion and function of miracles in select apocryphal texts from antiquity, it will become apparent how early Christian readers were led to look away from Christ, who is the very center and end goal of Holy Scripture.

23. Cordes, “River of Lies,” 1.

THE PROTOEVANGELIUM OF JAMES

The Protoevangelium of James is one of the earliest apocryphal texts that we have access to today. Clement of Alexandria, a church father from the third century, referred to the protoevangelium in his writing. The same can be said of his pupil, Origen, who wrote about a so-called “Book of James” that was responsible for Marian traditions, namely, the tradition that Joseph already had children from a previous marriage before being betrothed to Mary.²⁴ As a result, scholars date its composition as early as the middle to late second century. It is also sometimes called *The Proto-Gospel of James* or *The Infancy Gospel of James* because its contents deal with events before, or prior to, Jesus’ public ministry covered in the Gospels. James, the brother of Jesus, is the alleged author of the work.²⁵ However, the true author of the apocryphon is ultimately unknown.

The protoevangelium’s narrative recounts Jesus’ birth. However, the event takes place near the end of the text. Much more ink is spent on Jesus’ mother, Mary. The apocryphon naturally includes details of Mary’s upbringing that Scripture is silent about. It gives a full picture of who Mary’s parents were, the circumstances that led to her birth, and her childhood years spent serving in the temple. From there, the story catches up with what we see in the canonical Gospels: her betrothal to Joseph, the visitation of the angel Gabriel, the birth of Jesus,

24. Christopher J. Edwards, ed., *Early New Testament Apocrypha*, Ancient Literature for New Testament Studies vol. 9, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 143.

25. *Protoevangelium* 25:1, Elliott, *Collection*, 66.

the visitation of the wise men, and King Herod's slaughter of the innocents. At the end, the author of the protoevangelium includes an event where Elizabeth flees with John the Baptist to escape Herod's massacre by hiding within a mountain that God miraculously split open for the two of them.²⁶

Along with it being one of the earliest among the New Testament apocrypha, the protoevangelium is also one of the most influential. Stephen Shoemaker calls the protoevangelium the first Marian biography, and thus, the first visible shoot of early Christian devotion to Mary.²⁷ He writes, "Not only did the *Protevangelium of James* lay crucial foundations for future devotion to the Virgin Mary, but the apocryphon is itself evidence of an emergent reverence for Mary already in the later second century."²⁸

How did this happen? Why was such a fanciful text about the Virgin Mary written in the first place? In part, the answer has to do with the nature of apocryphal writings filling in gaps left by Scripture. "Whenever biographical literature shows gaps, legend generally springs up, in the absence of reliable information, to supply the deficiency."²⁹ Another reason for its composition may have arisen due to Christological concerns at the time. It seems rational that Jesus, the Son of God, born without sin, must have been born of a similarly holy and extraordinary mother.³⁰ It is also suggested how the text might have been written as a reaction to slander against Mary by

26. *Protoevangelium* 22:3, Elliott, *Collection*, 66.

27. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 47.

28. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 53–54.

29. Elliott quoting Oscar Cullman. Elliott, *Collection*, 46.

30. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 150.

the second century philosopher, Celsus. In fact, many details in the apocryphon seem to directly combat Celsus' accusations.

Where Celsus claims that Mary comes from a poor family, the author of the Protevangelium suggests that the opposite is true: Joachim [Mary's father] is so wealthy that he can offer in the temple twice what is required of him. Where Celsus claims that Mary had to spin thread in order to make ends meet, the Protevangelium shows her spinning only the finest thread, that which will be used for the construction of the temple veil. And finally, where Celsus posits that Mary became pregnant after she was raped by a Roman soldier, the author of the Protevangelium goes to great lengths to show that her purity and physical integrity are guarded for the entirety of her young life.³¹

Noteworthy in the protoevangelium is its defense of Mary's perpetual virginity, a doctrine often associated with the church of Rome today. This is seen first in how Joseph is described, or rather, how he describes himself in the text. In the protoevangelium, an angel of the Lord commands the high priest to gather widowers together so that the Lord can choose a proper spouse for Mary.³² To his initial chagrin, Joseph is chosen. He explains, "I have sons and am old; she is but a girl. I object lest I should become a laughing-stock to the sons of Israel."³³ By establishing Joseph as an old widower with children of his own, the origin of Jesus' siblings in the canonical Gospels is solved. So also, Mary's virginity and purity are kept intact.

Mary's perpetual virginity is further defended in the events immediately following Jesus' birth. Instead of giving birth to Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem, Mary gives birth in a cave on the way to Bethlehem. When she does, a Hebrew midwife recounts the miraculous birth to a woman named Salome, who responds, "As the Lord my God lives, unless I insert my finger and test her condition, I will not believe that a virgin has given birth."³⁴ Salome gets the chance to prove her

31. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 150.

32. *Protoevangelium* 8:2–3, Elliott, *Collection*, 60.

33. *Protoevangelium* 9:2, Elliott, *Collection*, 61.

34. *Protoevangelium* 19:3, Elliott, *Collection*, 64.

hypothesis, and upon doing so, her hand starts to burn and wither away as divine punishment for doubting Mary's virginity.³⁵ But, through prayer and by following the command of an angel, both Salome's hand and her faith in God are restored.

While some view Mary's perpetual virginity in the protoevangelium as a personalized defense against Celsus' accusations, Shoemaker argues differently. "The *Protevangelium* goes well beyond what is necessary to answer such accusations in praising Mary's character and extolling her supernatural qualities, so that it is difficult to see apology as the primary motive for this work."³⁶ For Shoemaker, Mary's virginity is just one characteristic of many that the author included primarily to praise Mary and to honor her character. Therefore, Shoemaker also concludes that the text "is not a work primarily about Christology" either, even though it explains the details of Jesus' birth.³⁷ Instead, everything in *The Protoevangelium of James* centers around and finds its purpose in Mary, not in Christ. This is made even more clear after paying close attention to the miracles that occur in the story.

Miracles in *The Protoevangelium of James*

Compared to the other apocrypha that this thesis will discuss, *The Protoevangelium of James* records the fewest number of explicit miracles. Jesus and the apostles are the ones performing most of the miracles found in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and in the apocryphal Acts. In the protoevangelium, Mary does not perform many miracles. Instead, most miracles happen to her.

35. *Protoevangelium* 20:1, Elliott, *Collection*, 65.

36. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 54.

37. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 54.

And they serve to support the author's main intent: the veneration of the Virgin Mary.

The author of the protoevangelium was clearly inspired by Old Testament events. The story surrounding Mary's birth has strong parallels both with Sarah's conception of Isaac in the book of Genesis and with Hannah's birth of Samuel in 1 Sam 1–2. The story begins with Mary's parents, both of whom are ashamed due to their lack of children. Her father, Joachim, despite being very rich, finds out that he is the only righteous man in Israel who has no offspring.³⁸ Upon learning this, he goes into the wilderness and fasts for forty days and nights, waiting for God to bless him.³⁹

Meanwhile, Mary's mother Anna laments over her own infertility and sings dirges of lament to God. After a particular dirge, an angel of the Lord appears to Anna and promises that she will bear a child, to which Anna responds: "As the Lord my God lives, if I bear a child, whether male or female, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it shall serve him all the days of its life."⁴⁰ After receiving a similar visitation from an angel, Joachim returns from the wilderness and celebrates with Anna. Mary's conception can therefore be likened to Isaac's miraculous conception which came about only by God's divine intervention.⁴¹ Her later dedication to serve in the Lord's temple is a clear parallel to Samuel in the Old Testament.

38. *Protoevangelium* 1:3, Elliott, *Collection*, 57.

39. Perhaps this is evidence of the protoevangelium promoting the gnostic theme of asceticism.

40. *Protoevangelium* 4:1, Elliott, *Collection*, 58.

41. The text is not specific in the timing of Anna's conception. Eric Vanden Eykel notes how some manuscripts support a variant reading of the angel's message to Joachim. Some use the perfect tense, "Anna *has* conceived" while others use the future, "Anna *will* conceive." If the former is used, then it implies a miraculous conception in Joachim's absence. Eykel also notes how the earliest known manuscript, Bodmer V, uses the perfect tense. This is significant as the perfect tense dramatically venerates Mary by implying that, just like Jesus, she too was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And although the protoevangelium does not explicitly describe an immaculate conception of Mary, it is not hard to see how such a teaching could be traced back to this text. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 58, footnote 8.

The story continues, including small miraculous details that further stress Mary's holy character. She was miraculously born on the seventh month⁴² of Anna's pregnancy, which was considered "highly auspicious."⁴³ She took her first steps at only six months old, whereupon Anna created a sanctuary for her in her bedroom and summoned the "undefiled daughters of the Hebrews" to serve her.⁴⁴ As per Anna's promise, she dedicates Mary to service in the temple at the age of three. Mary is then said to have been nurtured by the Lord like a dove and to have "received food from the hand of an angel."⁴⁵

From then on, the story follows the basic events of the canonical Gospels. Mary is betrothed to Joseph, though the protoevangelium fills in the details of exactly how that came to pass. Afterwards, an angel visits Mary and announces that she will miraculously conceive and give birth to Jesus. Mary then visits Elizabeth; however, the protoevangelium noticeably omits Mary's song of praise to God for the great things he did for her and for his people. Mary and Joseph then travel to Bethlehem and Jesus is born.

It has already been noted how the protoevangelium upholds Mary's perpetual virginity in the withering and healing of Salome's hand. Additionally, the protoevangelium provides even more details that paint Mary's birth of Jesus in a striking light. "And they stopped at the entrance of the cave, and behold, a bright cloud overshadowed the cave.... And immediately the cloud disappeared from the cave and a great light appeared, so that our eyes could not bear it. A short

42. Manuscripts vary concerning the duration of Anna's pregnancy. They range from six to nine months. Shoemaker notes, however, that the earliest manuscript supports the birth at seven months in and is the more likely reading. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 58.

43. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 58.

44. *Protoevangelium* 6:1, Elliott, *Collection*, 59.

45. *Protoevangelium* 8:1, Elliott, *Collection*, 60.

time afterwards that light withdrew until the baby appeared and it came and took the breast of its mother Mary.”⁴⁶ Jesus’ birth in the protoevangelium is visibly more extraordinary than in the Gospels. Bright clouds and blinding lights shine all around. Jesus seems to just “appear” out of thin air without any birth pains on Mary’s part—further supporting her perpetual virginity.

And yet, even though Jesus’ birth should be an event centered on Jesus himself, the prior context of the protoevangelium twists the focus to lie squarely on Mary instead. In Luke’s Gospel, immediately after Jesus is born, angels appear to a group of shepherds to announce the Messiah’s birth (Lk 2:11). This event is significantly absent in the apocryphal version, skipping instead to the wise men visiting Herod. The protoevangelium is not so concerned with the grand significance of Jesus’ birth. It is not as though the protoevangelium completely fails to mention how Jesus is “the living God”⁴⁷ and the Savior from sin.⁴⁸ However, given the extent to which the author goes out of his way to venerate Mary, these canonical descriptions of Jesus only serve to paint an even grander picture of Mary as a whole.

“The Grand Miracle”

C.S. Lewis once called the incarnation of Christ “the Grand Miracle.” By it, he meant that the incarnation is the central point of Scripture. “They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this.”⁴⁹ Indeed, Jesus’ coming into the

46. *Protoevangelium* 19:2, Elliott, *Collection*, 64.

47. *Protoevangelium* 11:2, Elliott, *Collection*, 61.

48. *Protoevangelium* 11:3, Elliott, *Collection*, 61.

49. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 108.

world was first promised by God in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:16). The rest of the Old Testament tells the history of God preserving that promise through his people Israel, meticulously watching over the human line of the Savior. What does it say of Christ or of the purpose of God's Word if this long-awaited incarnation lifted Mary up in Jesus' place?

The miracles displayed in *The Protevangelium of James* point away from Jesus. By using the miracle of the incarnation to primarily venerate Mary, Jesus' due veneration is (to put it lightly) watered down. As every other miracle in the apocryphon accentuates Mary's holiness, Jesus' holiness is left as an afterthought. Or, to put it another way, "a reader who knew only the *Protevangelium* might reasonably conclude that Mary is the holy figure and that Jesus' holiness derives from hers."⁵⁰

The veneration of Mary in *The Protevangelium of James* displays some of the deepest visible roots of the cult of the saints found in the Roman Catholic Church. Though not considered canonical by the church of Rome, its influence is still apparent considering Rome's emphasis on church tradition. Shoemaker concludes that "the *Protevangelium* should not be conceived so much as a failed rival to scriptural authority, once intended for inclusion within the biblical canon, but rather as a valued supplement to the scriptures that belongs more properly within the category of church Tradition."⁵¹ It's true that the author of the *protevangelium* may never have intended for his work to be considered canonical. However, to say that the apocryphon is "a valued supplement to the scriptures" is improper. As C.S. Lewis said, all Scripture culminates in Christ. To call a work that goes out of its way to point away from Christ a valuable supplement is grossly overstated.

50. Shoemaker quoting Beverly Roberts Gaventa. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 55.

51. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 51.

In 1 Cor 1:12–13, Paul spoke against the Corinthian church for creating divisions amongst themselves by wanting to follow the specific individuals who preached to them instead of following Christ alone. In a sermon on John 1:19–28, Martin Luther echoes John the Baptist's testimony to look to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He writes about the strong temptation for people to look away from Christ and instead to saints and individuals.

Thus we, too, cry out aloud in our wilderness. Nor must we ever stop doing so, but continually point people to Christ. For the devil does not intend to allow this testimony about Christ. He devotes all his energy to opposing it and will not desist until he has struck down and suppressed it. In this respect, we humans are weak and stubbornly perverse and are more likely to become attached to saints than to Christ. Within the papacy they have preached about this service rendered by these beloved saints, that one ought to rely on their merit.... So completely is man by nature bent on renouncing this testimony of John the Baptist.⁵²

Unfortunately, this veneration of human individuals at Christ's expense will be a theme found in other early New Testament apocrypha as well.

52. Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils Volume I*, ed. Eugene F.A. Klug, Erwin W. Koehlinger, James Lanning, Everette W. Meier, Dorothy Schoknecht, and Allen Schuldheiss, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 79.

THE INFANCY GOSPEL OF THOMAS

Where *The Protoevangelium of James* fills in details about Mary's early years, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* attempts to do the same for Jesus. Scripture is largely silent concerning Jesus' childhood, save for the episode of the twelve-year-old Jesus teaching in the temple during the Passover recorded in Luke 2:41–52. Naturally, early Christians were curious. "If Jesus was a miracle-working Son of God as an adult, what was he like as a child?"⁵³ The fictitious stories of Jesus' childhood in the infancy Gospel "take their cue" from their canonical counterpart in Luke's Gospel.⁵⁴ Allegedly written by an Israelite named Thomas,⁵⁵ *The Infancy Gospel* can be dated back to a similar time as the protoevangelium: the mid to late second century.⁵⁶

The story told in the infancy Gospel is purely speculative. Reidar Aasgaard writes how *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* "is of no value for the study of the Jesus of history."⁵⁷ It makes little sense from a historical point of view as it frequently contradicts Scripture's perspective. It

53. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 57.

54. Elliott, *Collection*, 68.

55. Most assume him to be Thomas the Apostle.

56. Church fathers like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus seemingly refer to details in the infancy gospel in their own writing. Notably, Irenaeus writes against a Gnostic group, the Marcosians, who taught a tradition of Jesus arguing with a schoolteacher over the meaning of the Greek letter Alpha. A similar episode occurs in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 79. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 279, footnote 4.

57. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 78.

also makes little sense from a theological point of view, as will be seen when comparing its miracles with the miracles of the New Testament.

That said, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is perhaps one of the most famous of the New Testament apocrypha. In writing this thesis and talking about it with classmates, relatives, and Christian peers, the infancy Gospel is the apocryphon that people seemed the most familiar with. At one point or another, they had heard the tales of the boy Jesus creating a flock of sparrows out of mud, or perhaps him striking down another child who bumped his shoulder while running past. The entire infancy Gospel depicts Jesus as a young child performing numerous miracles in his hometown of Nazareth—some for the good of the people, others not so much.

Though some may find the infancy Gospel to be entertaining and preposterous, the author's intent in writing it cannot be said for certain. Ehrman writes, "For modern readers it is difficult to know whether such stories were meant simply as speculative and entertaining episodes from the life of the youthful Son of God or, more probably, as serious accounts of Jesus' early years that were meant to foreshadow his character and activities as an adult."⁵⁸ If Ehrman is to be believed, and it is more likely that the author of the infancy Gospel wanted to foreshadow Jesus' character and work later in life, then deep Christological issues arise. For example, Jesus' motive for performing miracles in the apocryphon is not always pure. The God-child, Jesus, is painted as a mischievous boy who is unafraid to curse people that get on his bad side. This offensive depiction of Jesus leads Elliott to conclude that "the theological teaching of these stories is minimal.... Jesus is an *enfant terrible* who seldom acts in a Christian way!"⁵⁹

58. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 278.

59. Elliott, *Collection*, 68.

Opposingly, Aasgaard notes how recent research sees less theological difference between Jesus' character in the infancy Gospel and the canonical Gospels. He writes how scholars "see in the story a more 'mainstream' Christology, maintaining that its portrait has much more in common with perceptions of Jesus in the canonical Gospels, in which he also occasionally pronounces curses and woes."⁶⁰ Aasgaard also presents the possibility of the author's desire to emphasize Jesus' "human side" for their audience.⁶¹

Is modern scholarship correct in its evaluation? What theological issues arise when drawing a close comparison between the portrayals of Jesus in the infancy Gospel and the canonical Gospels? A brief analysis of the boy Jesus' miracles in the infancy Gospel helps to answer these questions.

Miracles in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas contains the most miracles performed in the shortest length of text compared to the other apocrypha mentioned in this thesis. A miracle occurs in nearly every paragraph of the apocryphon. As a result, Elliott's outline for the text is based solely on each subsequent miracle of Jesus.⁶² Jesus' miracles in the infancy Gospel can be categorized in three general ways: miracles meant to hurt people, miracles meant to help people, and miracles meant to demonstrate his divinity.

60. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 86.

61. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 87.

62. Elliott, *Collection*, 74–75.

The narrative begins on the Sabbath with Jesus playing in a stream at the age of five. By a single word, he cleanses the water and then creates twelve sparrows out of soft clay.⁶³ The Jews see this and chastise Joseph for his son's behavior. In response, Jesus claps his hands and commands the sparrows to leave, which they do, much to the Jews' amazement.⁶⁴ The beginning of the text is somewhat a parallel to accounts like Mark 2:23–3:6 where the Pharisees are deeply frustrated by Jesus and his disciples working on the Sabbath. Thus, Jesus being the "Lord of the Sabbath" is evident right away in the infancy Gospel.

From then on, however, the character of Jesus' miracles deviates substantially from the New Testament. The son of a scribe named Annas disperses the water that Jesus had collected with a tree branch. Jesus becomes angry and harshly accuses the boy: "'You insolent, godless ignoramus, what harm did the pools and the water do to you? Behold, now you shall wither like a tree and shall bear neither leaves nor root nor fruit.' And immediately that child withered up completely."⁶⁵ Shortly after, Jesus strikes another child dead who ran past and bumped into his shoulder.⁶⁶ The parents and other people of the village become fearful and understandably upset. They go to Joseph and plead with him to teach Jesus "to bless and not to curse."⁶⁷ Joseph attempts to admonish Jesus, but Jesus responds by striking all his accusers blind.⁶⁸ The author

63. *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 2:1, Elliott, *Collection*, 75.

64. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 2:4–5, Elliott, *Collection*, 76.

65. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 3:2–3, Elliott, *Collection*, 76.

66. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 4:1, Elliott, *Collection*, 76.

67. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 4:2, Elliott, *Collection*, 76.

68. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 5:1, Elliott, *Collection*, 76.

writes, “And those who saw it were greatly afraid and perplexed, and said concerning him, ‘Every word he speaks, whether good or evil, was a deed and became a miracle.’”⁶⁹

How different this is from the Gospels’ kind and compassionate portrayal of Jesus! In the Gospels, Jesus is no stranger to pronouncing woes to people (Matt 11:20–24; Luke 6:24–26). However, he does so in response to sinful behavior or unrepentance. Even when Jesus notably acted upon his anger by overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, he did so because the people were making God’s house into a “den of robbers” (Matt 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–18). In *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus’ miracles are malicious and unwarranted. They are the exact type of miracles that would be expected from an immature, ticked-off, supernatural five-year-old. They successfully depict Jesus as a divine being, yet one whom people ought to tread carefully around lest they end up cursed or dead. Later in the apocryphon, Jesus heals the ones he previously struck blind. Even then, the people respond in great fear: “And no one after that dared to provoke him, lest he should curse him, and he should be maimed.”⁷⁰

Admittedly, Jesus’ subsequent miracles in the infancy Gospel shift more from hurting people to helping people. Five times he miraculously saves people from death. He raises a boy who falls from the top of a house back to life.⁷¹ He heals a wood-cutter’s fatal wound.⁷² He heals

69. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 5:2, Elliott, *Collection*, 76.

70. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 8:2, Elliott, *Collection*, 78.

71. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 9:3, Elliott, *Collection*, 78.

72. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 10:2, Elliott, *Collection*, 78.

his brother, James, who was bitten by a venomous snake.⁷³ He raises a child who died of sickness to life.⁷⁴ And he raises a man who died while building a house back to life.⁷⁵

Interestingly, after each of these healing miracles (save for the healing of James), the crowds who witness them respond by praising God and worshipping Jesus.⁷⁶ This sudden response appears dissonant with what we read in the New Testament Gospels. After reading the infancy Gospel, a reader may conclude that the healing miracles of Jesus have the power to instantly convert people to faith, absent of any gospel message. And, considering Jesus' more destructive miracles, this conversion may partly be founded in fear. It all begs the question: why did Jesus perform miracles in his ministry in the first place?

Why did Jesus do Miracles?

Scholars see the miracles in both the canonical Gospels and in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and are quick to make comparisons. Jesus raises people from death to life in both sources. Jesus proves his power over the laws of nature in both sources. The miracles in the infancy Gospel are dramatic and ludicrous, and nothing stops the scholar from saying the same of the miracles in the New Testament. Yet, where scholars make comparisons, faith-filled Christians see troubling contrasts. Why did Jesus perform miracles? Why did he walk on water, feed the 5,000, heal the sick, and raise people from the dead? The answer can be found in asking why Jesus did anything

73. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 16:2, Elliott, *Collection*, 79.

74. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 17:1, Elliott, *Collection*, 80.

75. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 18:1, Elliott, *Collection* 80.

76. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 9:3, 10:2, 17:2, 18:1–2, Elliott, *Collection*, 78–80.

at all. Simply put, Jesus' miracles testified to his very nature as the gracious, selfless Savior of the world.

Like *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus' miracles in the New Testament objectively proved his divinity. Only God can do the impossible. Yet unlike the infancy Gospel, Jesus' miracles in the New Testament were never done to harm people. Instead, they showed the type of God that Jesus truly is—a kind and compassionate God whose ministry so often consisted of miraculously helping people in sickness and in need. “Every miracle testifies that Jesus is the true Son of God who has all power over life and death, but miracles are not intended to make us shake in fear at the naked power of the judge of all the earth. Jesus' miracles show us that he loves us.”⁷⁷

In contrast, what kind of God is Jesus made out to be in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*? Aasgaard lists an interpretation that finds “similarities between the infancy gospel and popular perceptions of the Greco-Roman gods, with the gods often avenging human hubris far beyond the gravity of the actual transgression.”⁷⁸ The New Testament Christian church emerged under the political control of Rome. Thus, the mixture of Greco-Roman deities with Jesus, though wildly inappropriate, is unsurprising. The miracles in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* paint Jesus as a capricious deity akin to the Roman pantheon of gods who demand worship and are quick to punish. When the boy Jesus flips his miracles from being destructive to helpful, the people respond with worship and praise. Yet their worship cannot be based on the true faith we see in the New Testament since the gospel message of forgiveness is completely absent.

77. Geoffrey Kieta, “Please Explain: Why Did Jesus Do Miracles?,” *FORWARD IN CHRIST* 109:1 (January 3, 2022). <https://forwardinchrist.net/why-did-jesus-do-miracles/>.

78. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 86.

In the Gospels, Jesus' miracles are always done in the context of his divine message of grace. Jesus' public ministry began with him preaching "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 4:17). When Jesus heals the sick throughout Galilee, it is accompanied with him "teaching in their synagogues" and "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom" (Matt 4:23). In Luke 5, Jesus miraculously healed a paralyzed man; not just to heal his physical ailment, but also to demonstrate his authority in healing the spiritual ailment of sin. "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Luke 5:23–24). Though a natural and intended outcome, Jesus' miracles were not primarily done to solve peoples' earthly problems, but to further authenticate his message of forgiveness for the sinner who believes.

When people only sought Jesus as a miracle worker and not as their Savior from sin, they missed the point. Jesus' miracles "weren't there for entertainment. In fact, when people came to Jesus just to be entertained, he usually avoided them. Miracles weren't done to make Jesus a celebrity. He often told people not to tell what he had done for them."⁷⁹ In other words, the miracles themselves did not have the power to convert people to faith. Rather, Scripture testifies that the Holy Spirit works primarily through God's Word to create faith in people's hearts (Rom 10:17).

When the Word of God is lost, then the miracle loses its purpose. Jesus reinforces this point in his story about the rich man and poor Lazarus: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). This statement would later prove to be true as Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, resulting in the Pharisees' plot to kill Jesus (John 11:43–53). And even after the resurrected Jesus shows

79. Kieta, "Please Explain."

love for his disciple Thomas by giving him visible proof of the resurrection, he tells him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). “Christ says in effect that faith should not rest on signs and wonders alone but on the Word.... Although the Lord performed signs and wonders in order to let Himself be seen and move people to faith, He nonetheless wanted people to look more at the Word than at the signs, which were intended to serve as a testimony to the Word.”⁸⁰

The sufficiency of God’s Word to create faith is a theme throughout the Gospels. So much so that when the Word is absent, miracles become a stumbling block for people. Luther wrote, “I would not want the grace to perform miracles; for those who pay no attention to the Word, against which the whole world has no reason to grumble, will not be moved by signs.”⁸¹ Thus, the people’s reactions of worship to Jesus’ resurrection miracles in the infancy Gospel deviate from what we see in the New Testament. The gospel message is entirely absent from the infancy Gospel, indicating that the people came to faith by visible signs apart from the means of grace. This is the real reason why *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* has no place in the canon of Scripture. It fails in communicating Christ as the forgiver of sins and Savior of the world.

80. Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: An Anthology Compiled by Ewald M. Plass, Volume II: Glory—Prayer*, (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959), 956.

81. Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, 954.

THE APOCRYPHAL ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Broadly speaking, the apocryphal Acts refer to any New Testament apocrypha that are about the New Testament apostles. Within this corpus of literature, scholars have recognized five sources as the “major apocryphal Acts.” They include *The Acts of Andrew*, *The Acts of John*, *The Acts of Paul*, *The Acts of Peter*, and *The Acts of Thomas*. These five apocryphal Acts were written in the second and third centuries. A gnostic group called the Manichaeans gathered them as a corpus and used them in substitution for the canonical Acts.⁸² Despite them often being grouped together, François Bovon argues that doing so erases what makes each text unique.⁸³ That said, the texts generally follow the same format. They reveal the ministry adventures of these five apostles after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. They explain where each of the apostles traveled, the miracles they were able to perform, and the natures of their deaths as martyrs.

In early centuries, all five of the Acts were attributed to one author named Leucius, a supposed disciple of John the Apostle.⁸⁴ However, recent scholarship has debunked this theory since each text differs in literary style. It is now assumed that each of the major apocryphal Acts was written by a different author, none of whom are identified as Leucius.⁸⁵ Only in the case of

82. Elliott, *Collection*, 229.

83. François Bovon, *New Testament and Christian Apocrypha*, ed. Glenn E. Snyder, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 198–199.

84. M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses, with Other Narratives and Fragments*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 228.

85. Elliott, *Collection*, 229.

The Acts of Paul can a definite author be named based on writings of the church father, Tertullian. He indicated that the text had been forged by a presbyter in Asia who had been caught in the act and subsequently put on trial by a church tribunal. Upon being convicted, the presbyter confessed that his forgery was done “for the love of Paul.”⁸⁶

Thus, scholars like Ehrman argue that the authors’ chief intent in composing the apocryphal Acts was primarily to provide entertaining stories concerning the miraculous lives of Jesus’ apostles.⁸⁷ As such, scholars still find historical value in these texts. “They are part of the literature of popular piety tinged from time to time with Gnostic ideas and teaching, but which as pieces of literature belong to early orthodox Christianity as practised in various places in the second century.”⁸⁸ The “Gnostic ideas” in the apocryphal Acts refer to the themes of asceticism, encratism,⁸⁹ and radical dualism, as well as occasional docetic descriptions of Christ. Though scholars argue that these apocryphal texts helped shape the evolving movement of Christianity in early years, their gnostic leanings and use of miracles betray any notion of true, “orthodox” Christianity.

Each of the major apocryphal Acts on their own dwarf the lengths of both *The Protoevangelium of James* and *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* respectively. This is because they contain several texts that fit under each apostle’s categorical umbrella. For example, included in *The Acts of Paul* are *The Acts of Thecla*, *3 Corinthians*, and *The Martyrdom of Paul*. Given the scope of the apocryphal Acts, this thesis will not provide a thorough treatment of each individual

86. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 32.

87. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 309.

88. Elliott, *Collection*, 229–230.

89. A type of asceticism practiced by the second-century Encratites. They practiced self-denial particularly through sexual abstinence and the rejection of marriage. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 208.

text. Instead, it will provide a brief synopsis for each of the major apocryphal Acts along with pertinent narrative information and an emphasis on notable miracles. These miracles often venerate the apostles themselves or are used as a means for quick conversion—two concepts familiar to this thesis already. Elliott proposes a potential order of composition for the Acts, which will explain the order in which they will be treated.⁹⁰

The Acts of Paul

As mentioned, *The Acts of Paul* consists of three major segments. Of special note for this thesis is *The Acts of Thecla*, which details the legendary narrative of Thecla, a woman converted by Paul's teaching. The narrative begins with Paul in Iconium after fleeing from Antioch. Paul is described as "a man small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged, of noble mien, with eyebrows meeting, rather hook-nosed, full of grace. Sometimes he seemed like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel."⁹¹ He preaches a sermon of beatitudes at the house of a Christian named Onesiphorus.⁹² Thecla, who is engaged to a man named Thamyras, hears Paul's preaching from her window and becomes "led on by faith."⁹³ From there, Thecla's journey as a female, miracle-working apostle begins.

The miracles in *The Acts of Thecla* are found in her miraculous escapes from danger and death. Upon refusing to marry Thamyras, Thecla is sentenced to be burned at the stake. However,

90. Elliott, *Collection*, 229.

91. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 3, Elliott, *Collection*, 364.

92. Included in his preaching are encratistic messages such as "blessed are those who have wives as not having them, for they shall experience God." *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 5, Elliott, *Collection*, 365.

93. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 7, Elliott, *Collection*, 365.

God sends a rain cloud to douse the flames before she can be harmed.⁹⁴ In Antioch, Thecla is sentenced to be thrown to the animals in a colosseum after refusing Alexander the magistrate's sexual advances. Yet, she miraculously survives every animal that is thrown at her.⁹⁵ Upon seeing her miraculous survival, the women in the audience are converted and shake the city with their shouts of praise.⁹⁶ The story concludes with an episode of God delivering Thecla from the hands of men set on raping her by having her flee through a divinely-opened rock.⁹⁷

While Thecla is the focal point of this story, the implication is that it was Paul who formed such a devout servant of God. Throughout the apocryphon, Paul is portrayed reverently and without fault. The same can be said of Thecla, whose miraculous survivals create mass conversions. Unsurprisingly, the character of Thecla went on to become an important saint and object of devotion throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.⁹⁸

The Acts of Peter

Robert F. Stoops Jr. calls *The Acts of Peter* “a Christian apology in the form of an entertaining narrative” meant to “present Peter as a model for Christian living.”⁹⁹ The story mainly surrounds

94. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 22, Elliott, *Collection*, 368.

95. During this episode, Thecla famously baptizes herself in a pool filled with violent seals. The seals, “having seen a flash of lightning” die while Thecla remains unscathed. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 34, Elliott, *Collection*, 370.

96. Additionally, a prominent woman named Tryphaena is seemingly raised to life by Thecla's miraculous survivals. She died in the first place upon seeing the animals released on Thecla. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 36–39, Elliott, *Collection*, 371.

97. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 44, Elliott, *Collection*, 372.

98. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 113.

99. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 253.

the miracle-filled contest between Peter and the magician, Simon Magus, inspired by Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8:9–25. Peter and Simon engage in more than one “miracle battle” where Simon wins the people over through his own miraculous signs, to which Peter responds by performing even greater miracles, thus winning the people back to faith. Peter’s miracles include causing both a dog and an infant to speak intelligently,¹⁰⁰ reviving smoked fish to life,¹⁰¹ and raising multiple people from the dead.¹⁰² At the climax of their final “miracle battle,” Simon flies over the temples and hills of Rome. Peter calls upon God to cast him down, and Simon falls, breaking his leg in three places.¹⁰³ *The Acts of Peter* also includes Peter’s martyrdom where he asks to be crucified upside down, “interpreting his inverted position as a sign of the human condition and the need for conversion.”¹⁰⁴

The Acts of John

The Acts of John contains some of the most over-the-top miracles in all the apocryphal Acts. His miracles range from raising many people from the dead to commanding bedbugs to leave his bed.¹⁰⁵ His resurrection miracles are especially noteworthy, as John not only has the power to raise people from death, but can also grant the same power to faithful Christians around him. The

100. *The Acts of Peter* 9–15, Elliott, *Collection*, 406–410.

101. *The Acts of Peter* 13, Elliott, *Collection*, 409.

102. *The Acts of Peter* 25–26, Elliott, *Collection*, 417–418.

103. *The Acts of Peter* 32–33, Elliott, *Collection*, 422–423.

104. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 261.

105. *The Acts of John* 60–61, Elliott, *Collection*, 328.

first instance of this is his resurrection of Cleopatra and Lycomedes.¹⁰⁶ In the beginning of the text, John is sent by God to Ephesus where he is to raise Cleopatra, the wife of Lycomedes, to life. Lycomedes becomes so distraught over the “lost beauty” of his wife that he dies in turn. John successfully raises Cleopatra from the dead. Then, surprisingly, John grants her the power to raise Lycomedes back from the dead as well.

A similar event happens in the story of Drusiana, Callimachus, and Fortunatus.¹⁰⁷ Callimachus is hopelessly infatuated with the celibate and newly married Drusiana. Drusiana is so distraught in becoming an object of sexual temptation that she falls ill and dies. In a disturbing unfolding of events, Callimachus bribes the servant, Fortunatus, to open Drusiana’s tomb so that he can sexually assault her corpse. Before he can carry out the deed, a serpent appears from the tomb, striking Fortunatus and killing him on the spot. The serpent then wraps around Callimachus’ legs and rests upon him, not allowing him to get up. John and a few disciples enter the tomb and confront Callimachus, who repents of his sin and converts to the one true God. Afterwards, John raises Drusiana from the dead, who in turn wishes to raise the snake-bitten Fortunatus from the dead too. The disciples dissuade John from doing so, to which John permits Drusiana to do the miraculous deed in his place.

Overall, *The Acts of John* displays a literary theme common to the other major apocryphal Acts. Ehrman notes how they “appear to be modeled on the ancient pagan ‘romances,’ or novels, that have come down to us from Greek and Roman late antiquity.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, where pagan romance stories elevate sexual love and relationships, the apocryphal Acts treat

106. *The Acts of John* 19–24, Elliott, *Collection*, 311–313.

107. *The Acts of John* 62–86, Elliott, *Collection*, 328–335.

108. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 36.

them as pitfalls to be avoided. Concerning *The Acts of John* specifically, Ehrman wrote, “Such entertaining narratives may not present ‘history as it actually happened,’ but they do indicate how Christians from the period understood the process of conversion to belief in the God of Jesus.”¹⁰⁹

The Acts of Andrew

Out of all the major apocryphal Acts, Nathan Johnson calls *The Acts of Andrew* “the longest, and textually the most complicated.”¹¹⁰ Due to the textual evidence, scholars like Johnson include the stories of *The Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, Gregory of Tours’ *Epitome*, and *The Martyrdom of Andrew* as the key texts behind *The Acts of Andrew*. This thesis is especially interested in Gregory of Tours’ *Epitome*. Originally titled *Book of the Miracles of the Blessed Apostle Andrew*, the *Epitome* is Gregory’s summary of *The Acts of Andrew* as he had access to it, with a special emphasis on Andrew’s miracles. Elliott calls the *Epitome* “our best authority for a general knowledge of the Acts of Andrew.”¹¹¹

Johnson writes how “the deeds of wonder narrated in Gregory’s *Epitome* inevitably echo the miracles and exorcisms of Jesus in the canonical Gospels.”¹¹² Just like Jesus, Andrew miraculously calms storms¹¹³ and drives out a legion of demons from a young man.¹¹⁴ And just

109. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 11.

110. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 195.

111. Elliott, *Collection*, 231.

112. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 213.

113. *Epitome* 21, Elliott, *Collection*, 279.

114. *Epitome* 27, Elliott, *Collection*, 281.

like the other apocryphal apostles, Andrew is more than capable of raising hordes of people from death to life. A common outcome of Andrew's miracles is conversion. In one instance, a demon-possessed boy is led to hang himself and Andrew is summoned to the scene. Andrew says to the people, "What will it profit you if you see this accomplished and do believe?' They said, 'Fear not, we will believe.' The lad was raised and they said, 'It is enough, we do believe.'"¹¹⁵

Gregory ends the *Epitome* with a prayer for himself that demonstrates a rising attitude of saint veneration among Christianity. "May Andrew, on whose death-day he was born, intercede to save him."¹¹⁶ Thus, *The Acts of Andrew* essentially points away from Christ and instead to the heroic, miracle-working apostle himself.

The Acts of Thomas

The Acts of Thomas (not to be confused with *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* or *The Gospel of Thomas*) recounts the missionary journey of Judas Thomas and supports the tradition of Thomas being the first person to bring Christianity to India.¹¹⁷ The story takes Thomas' name "Didymus" literally, as he is portrayed as Jesus' identical twin. The text begins with the apostles casting lots to see where they should go. Thomas' lot falls to India, much to his dismay. The resurrected Jesus intervenes and essentially sells Thomas as a slave to an Indian merchant heading back to

115. *Epitome* 14, Elliott, *Collection*, 276.

116. *Epitome* 38, Elliott, *Collection*, 283.

117. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 122.

his homeland. Despite initially not wanting to go, Thomas holds his peace and goes along with it.¹¹⁸

Throughout the text, Thomas performs miracles akin to the other apocryphal apostles, such as healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. However, the main purpose of the apocryphal text seems to lie in Thomas' preaching of chastity, abstinence, and encratism. Ehrman describes how the text was designed "to show that a source for supernatural power, and in fact for all right relationship with God, comes from living the life of renunciation, free from sexual activity of any kind, even within the context of marriage."¹¹⁹ A memorable episode involves Jesus appearing to a royal bridal couple on their wedding night and urging them to abstain from any sexual advances.¹²⁰ The couple heeds Jesus' words and converts to Christianity. However, since they look identical, Thomas is the one blamed by the king and is forced to flee.

The Sufficiency of the Word

In an essay that compared the canonical Acts with the apocryphal Acts, Bovon wrote, "Miracles, although present in the canonical acts, abound in the apocryphal acts in such proportion that the hero looks like a miracle-performing machine.... Of course these many miracles function as an invitation to believe or as a demonstration of a strong belief."¹²¹ His assessment is accurate. And it further emphasizes the theological problems in these apocryphal miracles.

118. *The Acts of Thomas* 2, Elliott, *Collection*, 448.

119. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 40.

120. *The Acts of Thomas* 11–16, Elliott, *Collection*, 452–454.

121. Bovon, *Christian Apocrypha*, 202–203.

The miracles in *The Protoevangelium of James* lead to an unscriptural level of saint veneration regarding the Virgin Mary. The miracles performed by the apostles in the apocryphal Acts achieve a similar outcome, albeit in a more subtle way. The apocryphal apostles still pray in God's name and preach messages about Jesus. Yet, given the frequency of their miracles, a reader cannot help but be drawn to the human individual over Christ. Sinful human beings are always tempted to look away from Christ and instead toward what eyes can see and rationalize—a reality that the canonical apostles often warned against (1 Cor 1:22–25). Luther spoke to this when he preached: “Therefore, you must not rely on how upright St. Peter may have been, but you should pay heed to his doctrine and faith, when he says that he believes he will be saved by the grace of Jesus Christ. For that is primary, to believe on Jesus Christ, that he alone can and will forgive sins and grant eternal life.”¹²²

The miracles in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* subtly indicate miracles as a means for conversion. The miracles performed by the apostles in the apocryphal Acts achieve a similar outcome, yet even more blatantly. Mass conversions happen frequently in the apocryphal Acts. Thecla's miraculous survivals convert the masses of people watching. Peter's miraculous contests with Simon Magus result in him winning crowds of people over to faith. According to the apocryphal Acts, the miraculous signs are more sufficient proof than the Word of God in creating faith in people's hearts. For example, look at Peter's miracle where he caused a dog to speak and afterwards raised a smoked fish back to life:

When the multitude with great astonishment saw the talking dog, many fell down at the feet of Peter, but others said, ‘Show us another miracle that we may believe in you as a servant of the living God, for Simon too did many wonders in our presence, and on that account we followed him.’ And Peter turning around saw a smoked tunny fish hanging in

122. Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils Volume 3*, ed. Eugene F.A. Klug, Erwin W. Koehlinger, James Lanning, Everette W. Meier, Dorothy Schoknecht, and Allen Schuldheiss, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 124.

a window. He took it, saying to the people, ‘When you see this swimming in the water like a fish, will you be able to believe in him whom I preach?’ And all said with one voice, ‘Indeed we shall believe you.’ So he went to the pond near by, saying, ‘In your name, O Jesus Christ, in whom they do not yet believe, I say, “Tunny, in the presence of all these, live and swim like a fish.”’ And he cast the tunny into the pond, and it became alive and began to swim.... Very many who had witnessed this followed Peter and believed in the Lord.¹²³

Even critical scholars see the dissonance between the miracles in *The Acts of Peter* and the New Testament.

The miracle stories in the Acts of Peter generally follow the patterns identified by New Testament form criticism. The miracles are signs of the power of Peter's God. However, in the Acts of Peter, miracles only rarely depend on the faith of the recipient. Rather, miracles engender faith by winning over pagan onlookers, restoring the faith of apostates, or bolstering the faith of believers. A few miracles are treated primarily as signs. A dried fish is brought to life in response to a crowd's demand for another sign before they will believe.... Peter's compliance stands in stark contrast to the reply Jesus gives the Pharisees when they demand a sign in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 8:11–12 and parr.).¹²⁴

Compare the miracles in *The Acts of Peter* or the similar miracle mentioned earlier in *The Acts of Andrew*¹²⁵ with Acts 3:1–4:4. In this account, Peter and John find a man who was lame from birth at the temple gate. In the name of Jesus, Peter miraculously heals the man, leading him to walk and jump in the temple courts. “When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him” (Acts 3:9–10).

Note how the people who witnessed Peter's miracle did not instantly convert to faith. Instead, the miracle only filled them with natural wonder and amazement. Peter then uses the opportunity to preach a gospel-driven message of Christ crucified and risen—a message that urged the people to repent and be blessed (Acts 3:11–26). The result? “Many who heard the

123. *The Acts of Peter* 12–13, Elliott, *Collection*, 409.

124. Edwards, *Early Apocrypha*, 269.

125. *Epitome* 14, Elliott, *Collection*, 276.

message believed; so that the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand” (Acts 4:4).

The apocryphal Acts betray the notion that the Word of God is sufficient for conversion. In the canonical Acts, the miracles of the apostles only serve to introduce the crucial gospel message of salvation. “The miracles of Christianity are like bells which announce that the preaching service is about to begin. But when it has begun, they cease to ring, having served their purpose. So the miracles of the New Testament era called attention to the fact that the completed redemption was about to be proclaimed.”¹²⁶

126. Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, 957, footnote 7.

CONCLUSION

In François Bovon's conclusion to his comparison between the canonical and apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, he writes:

The canonical acts and the apocryphal acts can be compared because they share some essential elements of Christianity. In the past such comparisons have been done for apologetic or polemical reasons. Apologetically, they have been used to prove that the canonical acts are an eloquent and orthodox Christian teaching while the apocryphal are a legendary and heretical literature for entertainment. Polemically, they have been compared to prove that historically or theologically the canonical acts are not 'better' than the apocryphal acts. Today we should try to avoid such traps and remain on the level of the history of literature and religious thought.¹²⁷

Bovon's conclusion well encapsulates both the value and danger in scholarly study of the New Testament apocrypha. For the historical scholar, the study of New Testament apocrypha reveals "essential elements" of an evolving Christian religion. Thus, the apocrypha should not simply be labeled as "heretical literature for entertainment" nor as being better or worse than the canon of Scripture. Rather, the apocrypha provides valuable historical and religious insight for readers today.

Many scholars who engage in such studies do not believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of God's Word. Their labeling early New Testament apocrypha as "essential elements of Christianity" would be like us labeling the Book of Mormon in the same way simply because the Mormon church identifies itself as "Christian." We agree that the early New Testament

127. Bovon, *Christian Apocrypha*, 220.

apocrypha is historically valuable as it provides insight into what the Christian church was exposed to in the first centuries A.D. But their true theological value is nonexistent for one simple reason: they fail to communicate Christ. The protoevangelium diminishes Christ. The infancy Gospel shows Christ as vindictive instead of gracious. And the apocryphal Acts betray the real reason Christ performed miracles in the first place by becoming a means for quick conversion.

One purpose for this thesis was to introduce a few apocryphal texts to people who may not have read them. My presupposition is that many Bible-believing Christians know to reject the apocrypha merely because they have been labeled noncanonical. This rejection is warranted, but it is the hope of this thesis to provide more depth to the debate. Miracles may be the first things a reader notices when paging through much of the early New Testament apocrypha. A Christian reader may find them risible and harmless at first glance. However, upon closer investigation, these miracles reveal the true nature of these apocryphal sources as deceptive legends that led some of the very first Christians astray.

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